

## Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Monday, 17th January, 2022  
6.00 - 6.40 pm

| Attendees                  |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Councillors:</b>        | Chris Mason (Chair), Alex Hegenbarth (Vice-Chair), Dilys Barrell, Nigel Britter, Alisha Lewis, Emma Nelson, John Payne, Julie Sankey and Paul McCloskey (Reserve) |
| <b>Also in attendance:</b> | Bev Thomas, Harry Mayo, Councillor Martin Horwood, Gemma Bell, Darren Knight and Andrew Robbins and Heath Gunter  |

### Minutes

- 1. APOLOGIES**  
Cllrs. Flynn and Stafford sent apologies, with Cllr. McCloskey substituting.
- 2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**  
There were none.
- 3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING**  
The minutes of the meeting held on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2021 were approved and signed as a correct record.
- 4. PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS, CALLS FOR ACTIONS AND PETITIONS**  
There were none.
- 5. MATTERS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE**  
There were none.
- 6. BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT (BID)**  
Heath Gunter, Chief Executive of the BID, explained that the BID had been renewed for a second five-year term in June 2021, with 86% of participating businesses voting in favour. It was led and funded by businesses, having expanded to now cover 772 in total. It charged 1.25% of the rateable value of the property, with exceptions for smaller businesses.  
  
He outlined the four pillars on which the BID operated: marketing and promotion, business support, town centre events and townscape enhancements. It was a founding partner of Marketing Cheltenham and had helped launch the Visit Cheltenham website and the Cheltenham gift card. Some of its most visible work had been seen in the town centre, such as the new and extended Christmas lights, with more than 10,000 people attending the

2019 switch-on event. Light Up Cheltenham and the big wheel had attracted even more people to the town centre and boosted business as a result. They also sponsored major events like the Paint Festival, Wellbeing Festival and Festival of Cycling, and he stressed the importance of spreading people around the town rather than focusing everything in one area. It was key to improve both the quantity and quality of events, and this meant making Cheltenham an appealing place to hold them.

He noted that the pandemic had made it clear that many businesses were not digital ready. The BID provided support to help them achieve this and benefit from the significant potential for marketing and communications. They also helped businesses sort out their energy bills to save money, and had given advice to businesses that were unaware exactly what grants they were entitled to during the rounds of Covid business support. It also ran a business of the month award and an annual awards ceremony to highlight outstanding achievements. In the next BID term, he wanted to get ambassadors out to these businesses and meet them face-to-face, directly addressing their concerns. It was essential to continue building partnerships with businesses and organisations across the county.

One Member praised Cheltenham's Christmas events and asked whether other religious festivals were supported by the BID. The BID CEO responded that this would be a key aspect of their work, as it was important to engage with different groups in the community.

One Member asked whether the BID levy was mandatory for businesses in the area. The BID CEO responded that it was, and that collections were administered by the council's rates team. There were some exceptions, which were outlined in their rules. Around 97% of businesses paid the levy each year, although payments had effectively been over 100% in 2021 year because some businesses which hadn't paid in previous years had caught up. Some debts were written off depending on circumstances, and the BID did not aggressively chase businesses that were unable to pay. He noted that it was generally larger corporate businesses that did not pay.

One Member noted that the levy was due to increase by 0.02% per year. If inflation were to exceed this, how would the BID cope with overall drop in income? The BID CEO responded that a lot of their expenditure had been on setting up infrastructure, such as the energy supply for the Christmas lights, which were one-off hits and would not need to be paid for again. If necessary, the levy could be increased with the agreement of the BID board.

One Member asked for further detail on the role of the ambassadors. The BID CEO clarified that there were currently three paid ambassadors who varied between full-time and part-time. He did some of the ambassadorial work himself.

One Member asked how many defibrillators the BID provided. The BID CEO responded that there were currently two in Montpellier and one on the Strand, and he was working to get sponsorship to provide more in the near future.

One Member asked whether there were any plans to extend the BID inclusion zone. The BID CEO responded that there were not currently, but this could be explored in the BID's next term were it to be renewed again.

One Member asked how the gift card offer was being publicised. The BID CEO acknowledged that it had not been publicised as much as it should have been, and he was keen to push this harder in years to come. The high turnover of staff due to Covid had affected results as workers were often unaware what the card was when customers presented it.

One Member asked how the BID would help to reduce energy use and contribute to other climate change goals. The BID CEO responded that this was central to its aims, and he was working closely with the Cabinet Member Climate Emergency to see how it could contribute.

One Member asked how much members of the BID interacted with each other, considering the potential for mutually beneficial relationships if businesses were prepared to engage. The BID CEO agreed that this was a key benefit of partnership working that they should encourage wherever possible.

## **7. BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR COMING YEAR**

Cllr. Babbage's update from the Budget Scrutiny Working Group was taken as read.

One Member asked whether the group had been broadly favour of the budget proposals. Another Member, who sat on the Budget Scrutiny Working Group, felt that they had found it to be a sound and satisfactory budget, with the only major area of debate being the topic of payment provision.

One Member asked how often the group met. The Head of Property, Finance and Assets outlined the group's timetable and explained that it met around four times a year to feed directly into the budget process before significant Cabinet and Council decisions, while also looking at budget monitoring reports.

## **8. ASSET MANAGEMENT STRATEGY 2022/23 TO 2026/27**

Gemma Bell (Head of Property, Finance and Assets and Deputy Section 151 Officer) (GB) introduced the Asset Management Strategy, which was due to be considered by Cabinet and Council in February.

She explained that the current strategy had been approved in 2016, and that the situation had changed significantly since then. The strategy had been drawn together through discussions with various parties, including the Asset Management Working Group, Cabinet and senior advisors. Once approved, they would produce asset management plans for each category of asset the council possessed, with the overarching objective of ensuring that officers could make safe and informed recommendations to Members in order to maximise benefit for the council.

One Member praised the strategy for taking on a challenging topic and using private sector thinking in a public sector environment. It was not just about financial gain, but also about understanding the wider value of assets. Were

officers confident it could be delivered with the council's current resources, or did further skills need to be brought in? GB responded that the first year of the strategy would be primarily about gathering and analysing data in order to review and assess processes, and she was confident that the team they were bringing together across property and finance was fit for the job. They were using systems like Clearview to pull together large amounts of performance data quickly, and had recruited experienced building and estate surveyors to deliver options appraisals and business cases.

## **9. THE COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID CRISIS**

Darren Knight, Executive Director People and Change, introduced his report, acknowledging that it had been a challenging couple of years, and that it was important to learn lessons wherever possible. The main focus had been on maintaining essential services and keeping lead members informed throughout the pandemic. He outlined key achievements, including the rapid payment of business support grants and the Gloucestershire Community Help Hub. The SWAP internal audit had seen positive results, and they had received external recognition for their work. He thanked different departments and the council's partners for their assistance as well.

One Member noted that the report reminded them how well council staff had adapted to the radical changes caused by the pandemic, and thanked the Executive Director People and Change for his work. Another Member echoed this, noting that the transition to working from home across the council could not have been easy. They suggested that CBC needed to make more of the awards it had received. The Executive Director People and Change agreed, adding that awards were not just a morale booster but also a useful way of seeing how their response compared to others around the country.

One Member praised the work of officers and members during a situation that was unprecedented and impossible to predict. Going forward, greater engagement with parish councils was needed, and it would be useful to have a template for this. The Executive Director People and Change responded that the C5 group met on a regular basis, while he and the Leader of the Council had met parish councillors throughout the pandemic and would continue to do this. Local leaders who were embedded in their communities and understood residents' needs were clearly of great value.

One Member added that the Grant Thornton recommendations on improving the scrutiny process should be taken forward to ensure lessons were learned from that too. The Executive Director People and Change agreed with this, adding that business continuity arrangements were in the process of being reviewed.

One Member agreed about the importance of parish councils, and praised the way community support sprang up in their ward early on in the pandemic. They asked whether the emergency response management arrangements had stifled innovation. The Executive Director People and Change responded that on the contrary, they had enabled good ideas to be reviewed at pace, as evidenced by the numerous examples laid out in the report.

One Member asked whether Cheltenham had been affected by any of the fraudulent business grant claims that were currently in the news. The Executive Director People and Change responded that they were looking into a handful of cases, but there had been effective checks and balances in place to prevent it becoming a widespread issue. They had benefitted from insight and local knowledge from ward members and the BID.

One Member highlighted the focus on staff wellbeing, and asked whether the wellbeing group would continue. The Executive Director People and Change confirmed that it would continue, and added that the last employee wellbeing survey saw an improvement on the year before.

One Member suggested passing on CBC's positive experiences and lessons to other councils so that they could learn from it. The Executive Director People and Change noted that the LGA and South West Councils were both helpful in doing this. Officers had published case studies on how they had helped businesses, and they were working with regional conferences and other events to spread these lessons, such as how they strengthened their business communication during the pandemic.

On behalf of the committee, the Chair thanked the Executive Director People and Change and the wider council staff for their work throughout the pandemic.

#### **10. COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY (CIL) REGISTER**

Andy Robbins (Interim Head of Planning) noted that CIL was a complex piece of legislation, and highlighted the three key elements of his report: the income received by the CIL; the continuing role of S106 planning obligations in funding infrastructure; and an outline of future proposals for governance arrangements.

He pointed members towards paragraphs 3.1 to 3.5, which outlined matters in terms of CIL receipts and expenditure. A key part of that was the statutory obligation to pass on a certain proportion of CIL receipts to parish councils. Although CIL had been in place for nearly two years now, the receipts had been modest so far. He expected them to increase in year 3 and accelerate significantly after that to become a key financial resource in the delivery of strategic neighbourhood infrastructure. The delay was a product of the relatively slow planning system, as the levy was generally paid upon commencement of development.

The council continued to collect S106 contributions, which were usually for site-specific infrastructure work, such as highway infrastructure improvements. The system by which affordable housing was secured sat separate to CIL. His report then covered the split between strategic infrastructure funding, 70% of which was earmarked for the JCS, and the more modest neighbourhood fund, which the council had more of a free hand over and aimed largely towards the unparished areas of the town. Officers were working on neighbourhood fund governance arrangements which they hoped to bring forward soon. A board would be established in due course with decision-making authority over this budget, although there was no timetable for this yet as they awaited the results of the consultation on the Infrastructure Funding Statement. He added that

some strategic infrastructure funding was drawn from other funding streams, including from the county council.

One Member asked for more detail on the list of IFS projects. The Interim Head of Planning responded that he would be happy to circulate the full set of appendices to members after the meeting, and hoped to bring updated information to members in the next couple of months.

One Member suggested that the S106 funding collected from developers was often underwhelming considering what they might expect from them, and the way the funds were used was often divorced from the needs of the community. The Interim Head of Planning explained that there were strict rules on how much S106 funding could be sought and what it could be spent on, so they did not have a strong hand in negotiations. The new regulations made it clear that S106 monies could only be sought where infrastructure was necessary for development to go forward. Community infrastructure funding was difficult to secure under current regulations, whereas in the past they could talk more openly to developers about what they could offer the community. It was important to make the most of what they had to maximise community benefit.

One Member asked whether greater S106 funding and value for money could be delivered if local councillors and stakeholders were more involved in the process. The Interim Head of Planning responded that while there was no formal step involving ward members, they were welcome to contribute and their local knowledge was always valuable. He suggested that a more transparent process would be beneficial for all concerned.

One Member suggested that the committee recommend that Cabinet work with officers to deliver greater ward member engagement in the process. The Interim Head of Planning cautioned against making this a formal system when the planning process was slow enough already. He suggested that instead, officers could give members training on what was available through S106 and how the benefits of this could be maximised. Members were in agreement that this would be helpful.

One Member asked who would sit on the CIL board and how this would be appointed. The Interim Head of Planning responded that he did not know yet, as this would flow from the JCS and local governance arrangements.

One Member thanked the Interim Head of Planning for his summary of what often seemed an arcane system, and asked about the effect of CIL on unparished areas. The Interim Head of Planning explained that the council had the most freedom over how it spent the money in these areas. Many authorities had a bidding system where local groups could apply for funding based on various criteria, and ward members played a key role.

One Member asked whether parishes were penalised for not having a Parish Plan. The Interim Head of Planning clarified that when developments took place in an area with a Parish Plan, the parish received 25% of CIL receipts as opposed to 15% without. This was intended as an incentive for local communities to develop their own plans, rather than a punishment for those that did not. The parish council could do what it wanted with their section of the

funding, while 70% of the remainder was allocated to strategic infrastructure and 5% to administration costs.

One Member asked whether money raised for the JCS in Cheltenham could be spent in the other JCS boroughs. The Interim Head of Planning AR responded that funds from this 70% pot could be spent in Cheltenham, Tewkesbury or Gloucester, with the joint development plan aiming to benefit all three areas. The terms of the JCS were continually reviewed and could be changed in the future if the council so desired.

One Member asked who exactly would decide which projects were deserving of funding. The Interim Head of Planning explained that the CIL board would make these decisions.

Members thanked the Interim Head of Planning for his detailed report and informative responses to their questions.

**11. FEEDBACK FROM OTHER SCRUTINY MEETINGS ATTENDED**

Cllr. Barrell's updates from the 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021 and 11<sup>th</sup> January 2022 meetings of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee were taken as read.

The Gloucestershire Police and Crime Panel and the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee had not met since the last O&S meeting.

**12. CABINET BRIEFING**

Cllr. Hay, Leader of the Council, updated members on upcoming reforms to the Integrated Care System. While the council was currently represented on the Health and Wellbeing Board, it was not clear what level of member involvement there would be on the new Integrated Care Board. This was not something they could control, but it was worth keeping an eye on. She echoed Members' previous points about the need to implement the recommendations from the Grant Thornton scrutiny audit.

She hoped that the government's White Paper would be published soon, having originally been expected on the 16<sup>th</sup> January. She was expecting further detail on plans for devolution and the next rounds of available government funding.

**13. REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORKPLAN**

The scrutiny workplan had been circulated with the agenda. One Member noted that the details of the Public Annual Report in June needed updating to reflect staffing changes.

**14. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

28<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

Chris Mason  
**Chairman**